Name: _____ Date: _____

The Money Donkey

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1096 words

There was once a poor widow in Tuscany who lived with her only son, and the two of them were frequently very hungry indeed. She earned a few coins by weaving, but the boy was far too young to find any work. One bitter morning she said to him, "Go to your uncle, who is a steward on a big farm, and ask him to help us. We are his family, and he will surely help us." The boy put on his cap and walked all the way to the enormous farm across the valley.

"Uncle," he said, "my mother weaves all day, but it is not enough. Will you help us?" The steward smiled kindly and said, "I should have helped you sooner. Now I will give you something wonderful, which will last for the rest of your life. Here is a little donkey that lays money. Spread a cloth under him, and he will fill it with shiny gold coins. But listen carefully. Never tell anyone about him, and never leave him with a stranger." The boy thanked him and set off for home, leading his donkey.

It was a very long journey, and when darkness began to fall, the boy stopped at a comfortable inn beside the road. "I need a room," he told the landlord, "and my donkey must sleep in it with me." The landlord frowned. "Impossible!" But the boy insisted, and at last the landlord gave in, although he was suspicious. When the boy had shut the door, the landlord crept up and put his eye to the keyhole. What he saw made him gasp. The donkey was laying gold coins, one by one, onto the cloth.

"What marvelous luck!" whispered the landlord. "That donkey is worth more than my whole inn." He hurried off to the stable and found another donkey of the same size and color, and he swapped them while the boy slept. In the morning the boy paid his bill and left. But when he spread his cloth, the donkey he had brought out of the inn did not lay anything at all. The boy examined it closely, and then he examined it again. "This is not my donkey," he said, and he marched straight back to the inn.

"I am sorry to say you have changed my donkey," said the boy. The landlord threw up his hands. "How dare you say such a terrible thing! Everyone here is perfectly honest. Be off with you, before I forget my manners!" The boy walked sadly back to his uncle's farm, leading the wrong donkey, and explained everything that had happened. "If you had not stopped at that inn, it would never have happened," said the uncle. "But do not be discouraged. Here is another gift for you."

He gave the boy a beautiful tablecloth. "When you spread it and say, 'Tablecloth, make ready,' a wonderful dinner will appear," said the uncle. "Be careful with it, and tell nobody." The boy bowed, thanked his uncle again, and started home. But he was tired and hungry, and when evening came, he completely forgot how important it was to be careful. He stopped at the

same inn and told the landlord, "You need not make me any supper. I have all I need in my bag."

The landlord's eyes lit up with excitement. That night he peeked through the keyhole and saw the tablecloth produce a magnificent feast of soup, roast chicken, bread and cheese. The boy ate until he was full and went to bed. And once again, the landlord crept in, and he swapped the magic cloth for another, with the very same fringe and stitching. The next day, in the middle of a forest, the boy spread his cloth and called, "Tablecloth, make ready!" Nothing happened at all. His stomach rumbled unhappily, and he turned around and trudged back toward the farm.

Back at the farm, the uncle shook his head sadly, but he did not scold the boy. "That innkeeper is a very sly man," he said. "This time you shall have something that will teach him a lesson." He handed the boy a polished stick with a golden handle. "Put it under your pillow. If anyone tries to steal it, say, 'Dance, stick, dance!' and it will go on dancing until you say, 'Stop.' But never boast about it, and never leave it out of your sight." The boy bowed low and promised.

Once again he came to the inn, carrying the stick openly in his hand. The landlord's eyes went straight to the stick. "That is an extremely handsome stick," he thought. "It must be magic too." That night the boy pretended to be asleep, but his eyes were open a crack. Very quietly, the landlord crept across the floor and slid his hand under the pillow. He pulled out the stick, and he was just about to tiptoe away when a voice said calmly, "Dance, stick, dance!"

The stick leaped out of the landlord's hand. It rapped him on the hat, tugged at his coat, and chased him around the room, knocking over the chairs and bouncing off the walls. The landlord hopped over the bed, ducked under the table, and ran in circles, shouting for help, while his family and all the other guests came crowding to the doorway to see what the commotion was. "Help me, boy!" the landlord panted. "Make it stop!" "Not until I have my donkey and my tablecloth," said the boy.

The landlord had no breath left to argue. He ran to the stable and brought back the real donkey, and then he hurried to his own cupboard to fetch the magnificent tablecloth. He laid them at the boy's feet, and then the boy said, "Stop!" and the stick fell to the floor. In the morning he set off for home, with the donkey in front and the cloth over his arm. The landlord did not even come out to say goodbye.

When the boy told his mother what had happened, she laughed until she cried. Then she said they must have a party and invite all their relatives, so that everyone could see how things had changed. On the day, the guests arrived and found the fire out and the kitchen cold. "Are they making fun of us?" they whispered. Just then the boy spread the cloth on the table. "Tablecloth, make ready!" he said, and the best dinner anyone had ever seen appeared. And after that, the widow and her son never went hungry again.

Questions

1. Who gave the boy the donkey that lays money?

A. His uncle, the steward
B. The innkeeper
C. His mother

2. How did the innkeeper learn about the donkey and the cloth?

A. The boy told him
B. He looked through the keyhole
C. A neighbor told him

3. Why did the boy go back to the same inn the third time?

A. He wanted his things back
B. He liked the food
C. He did not know another inn

4. What made the landlord give back the donkey and the cloth?

A. The boy begged him
B. The stick would not stop until he did
C. His family told him to

5. In this story, a suspicious person is one who

A. does not quite trust something
B. is very hungry
C. is fast asleep

Words to know

steward: farm manager
suspicious: not trusting
insisted: would not give in
discouraged: losing hope
polished: rubbed smooth

Answer key: The Money Donkey

1. A. His uncle, the steward
2. B. He looked through the keyhole
3. A. He wanted his things back
4. B. The stick would not stop until he did
5. A. does not quite trust something